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HANNES MEINKEMA was born in 1943 and appeared on the literary scene in 1974 with her novel *The Moon-eater*. This was followed in 1975 by a collection of short stories entitled *Summer Is a Long Time in Coming*. With her third book, *And Then There'll Be Coffee* (novel, 1976), which became a bestseller, she became the most widely read and best-known woman author in the Netherlands. She next published another collection of short stories *The Green Widow and Other Stories* (1977), *The Inner Egg* (novel, 1979), and *My Mother's Name* (stories, 1980).

MY MOTHER'S NAME

("De Naam Van Mijn Moeder")

by Hannes Meinkema

TRANSLATED FROM THE DUTCH
BY JAMES BROCKWAY

Why did I do it? Did I do it to revenge myself on her, or just to be closer to her? Am I crazy, am I sick?

After the divorce we were completely dependent on each other, but that didn't matter, I could already do quite a lot. I could go and lie at her side when she cried in bed, I could do the shopping. I told her what she should wear in the morning.

My father had been a man with a mustache who was away at sea for eight months in the year: so you'd say it didn't make all that difference whether she was married or divorced, but it made an awful lot of difference to her. My mother's a person who always knows the way everything ought to be done—after the divorce she'd become entirely unsure of herself. You could tell by little things. You could tell, for example, when the potatoes

for our evening meal were ready long before the greens or the meat—and while I was sitting on a chair in the kitchen just as in the past, watching her, full of admiration for her timing, and to grind the nutmeg if need be, because I was so fond of the shape of the little nutmeg grater, with its rounded little tummy and its little box, complete with lid, to catch the grains in—while I was sitting there I was struck by the way she would often walk backwards and forwards, unnecessarily, and even drop things. My capable mother. And at night I'd hear the john flush four, five times: the worry had given her diarrhea. The next morning she'd laugh about that herself: I have to act so hard outwardly, she'd say, that I go all soft inside as a reaction—and I'd laugh with her, but when I heard the john flush three times in an hour, I didn't laugh at all.

I saw to it that I went straight home after school in case there was something I could do for her. I would make tea for the two of us and we would drink it in the kitchen while discussing how we'd tackle the problem of the evening meal. I, who was so fond of departing from the rules, insisted we have a hot meal every day—she ate so little, she was growing so thin. And if my girl friends asked me to come and play at their home I told them they'd have to come to mine. They did, too, in the beginning, but I don't know, I couldn't really show much interest in all that anymore, and after a while they stayed away and I didn't miss them.

Four years passed in this way, years in which, it's true, I did sit my entrance exam and passed, so changed schools and had to deal with a separate teacher for each subject and a class full of unfamiliar children—but what went on at school only acquired significance when I told about it at home and my mother said what she thought about it. My real life was

at home, where we did everything together, my mother and I, where I knew who I was, and where I was needed too, even though my mother now only rarely had any trouble with her stomach.

When I was fourteen my mother acquired a friend. I say a friend, but I mean Gerrit. He fell in love with her and she probably with him, although she didn't tell me as much, but that's how it must have been, for after a period during which she let me share her feelings less and less and I grew more and more unhappy because she was drawing away from me, there came a day when she said he was coming to live with us.

Just like that.

I hated him, and I hated her too for bringing him into our house. I hated the bedroom, I hated the sound of the john at night telling me how unneeded I had become. I hated the meals when everything I told about school would be heard by him too.

I began to come home less. I stopped drinking tea in the kitchen. I began to keep my mouth shut at table. And if my mother sought my company and wanted to talk to me I was purposely as rude as I could be, I said things to her that I knew would hurt her (I said she was getting old, I said she looked so awful I was ashamed of her). And then I hated myself. But hated her too, her too, because I knew she would go and talk to him about what she was sure to call my "problems with adapting." I hated her because she had betrayed me. I hated her because she was no longer mine.

Yes, I was jealous, but it took me a few months to realize it. For a long time I thought that she alone was responsible for the estrangement between us. Her feelings for me must have changed. She was behaving differently, wasn't she? I don't know, the atmosphere at home was exactly like that in

a television ad—all forced cheerfulness, with mommie, poppie and teenage daughter. For instance, my mother began calling me “my darling” too, a thing she had never done before.

I began to feel sorry for myself. I drew in bags under my eyes with a lead pencil to appear pitiable, and hoped there’d be someone who’d notice how bad I looked, so they’d pay attention to me . . .

I was jealous but didn’t recognize my feelings. After all, I had never before felt I wanted her to belong to me: you don’t feel things that are natural as anything extraordinary.

It was a few months before I understood what I felt, and I was ashamed. Hating him didn’t matter, but her—I didn’t want that.

A teacher at my school once told me I am the sort of person who is good at coming to decisions. I decided to get used to the situation, because I did realize I could only master my feelings if I learned to accept his presence in the house. So I tried to. It wasn’t easy and at night I’d cry in my bed because it was so difficult. But once I’ve started off on a thing, I go through with it, and I reminded myself why I was doing it. That helped. I didn’t, after all, want to lose her love! And she could only love me if I liked him. So . . .

And so it came about that I didn’t go upstairs that evening. My mother had a meeting, he and I were alone together in the house, and I stayed downstairs instead of going up and doing my homework, for I wanted there to be some contact between us.

I sat on the sofa, and he on one of the two chairs opposite. I was reading a pop magazine, he the *Weekly Post*. Minutes went by, then I slapped my magazine to and looked at him. Till he felt me looking at him.

“What are you reading about?” I asked.

“Oh,” he said and laughed (actually it was that grown-ups’ laugh I’d always disliked so much), “that wouldn’t interest you.”

“If it didn’t interest me I wouldn’t ask.” I wasn’t entirely honest—I wasn’t really interested in what he was reading, but I did want to hear what he thought was interesting and how he’d talk about it.

As he was speaking (it was about trade unions and some agreement or other the Cabinet had come to with them and which some members of the government no longer wanted to keep to, something of that sort), I watched him and saw what attracted my mother in him. When he grew enthusiastic he had something attractive about him—I hadn’t noticed it before, because he’d never been enthusiastic in my presence. So I tried to keep him talking by asking him questions (the difference between the two houses of Parliament, I’m always forgetting that), but there came a moment all the same when we had nothing left to talk about. So I just sat and smiled at him.

“Do you already have boy friends?” he then asked.

“At times,” I said.

He looked at me for a moment, then stood up. “You’d like a drink, I bet,” he said. “What shall I pour you?”

I didn’t know. I never touch strong drink.

“I’m having a whisky,” he said. “Care to join me?”

“All right,” I said, and we drank whisky. I didn’t enjoy the first glass, but he said you had to get used to the taste, so I took courage and went on drinking and, indeed, the second glass didn’t taste so bad.

For a while we talked of other things, my school, his work (he does something in computers), and then he returned to the subject of my boy friends.

"What do you get up to with them?" he asked. He was really attractive when he smiled.

"Nothing special, a French kiss or two," I said, though it was none of his business.

He poured me out a third glass of whisky. "Aren't you curious to know what happens after that?" he asked. I looked at his hand which was clasping the bottle and was reminded of those advertisements in magazines in which men are holding bottles, and I saw his hand and I thought that's a man's hand, man's hand, and he bent over toward me after he'd put the bottle aside and he put his fingers under my chin so that I was forced to look at him and he smelled of tobacco, and he asked me again if I wasn't curious and suddenly I *was*, although I'd never been before, so I nodded.

And then we went to bed.

Since he'd been living with us my mother made breakfast in the mornings, and the next morning I was scared to go downstairs. I hung around as long as I could so that I'd have to rush through breakfast to get to school on time. But all she asked was if I'd slept well. Nothing else was said.

That afternoon I stayed away till dinnertime and when I got home he was already there. We sat down to table. Nothing unusual. And there was no tension either, everything was the same as at other times. Even he acted toward me exactly as before. As if nothing had happened, as though that thing between us had never taken place.

I went upstairs immediately after the meal, I was all confused. I didn't understand a thing about it. My mother is the sort of person who always reacts if anything happens, so she couldn't know. He hadn't told her. The rotter. My mother still didn't know a thing!

I thought about it that night in bed. I couldn't sleep. It kept going through my head, the way it was: he hadn't said anything, she didn't know about it, what would happen now, how would it go on from here?

There was only one solution, of course. I had to tell. I couldn't very well let myself be maneuvered into a situation where he and I would know something she didn't; I had no wish to share a secret with him. What we already shared was bad enough.

So, home from school the following day, I told her. I didn't say much, I simply told her what had happened.

She hardly believed it at first, then she grew very quiet, tense, I don't know, it was terrible the way she looked, it hurt to see her face, but she did look at me. All she asked was whether he had used a preventative and I said, yes, a condom, and she said, "Thank God," but she didn't, of course, sound at all grateful, "and now you go and do your homework."

Later I heard the awful sounds of quarreling downstairs, I couldn't help but cry about it, it reminded me of the days when my father was still living with us and, that made me afraid, for now everything would change just as it had then.

I knew it, and this time it was my fault.

It did change: he packed his bags and left.

But after he'd gone, things weren't the same as they'd been before. My mother and I went on acting coolly to each other. She no longer talked with me. He'd left, but he was more present in her thoughts than I was. She didn't see me. We shared our meals, she even went on getting the breakfast, but she didn't speak. Except to ask how was school today. Nothing more. And she didn't mention that evening again and never uttered Gerrit's name.

I understood what she meant. It was my fault he'd left,

that's why she was no longer speaking. That *I* was still there had to be a punishment for her. She had had to choose between him and me and because I was still too young to look after myself, she'd had to choose me, and now she hated me because I had come between him and her and it was my fault he'd left.

So the other thing had to be my fault too. That drinking, I mean, and the sex with him.

Formerly, this was precisely what I would have liked to talk to her about, because it was this that I was always thinking about. About how it had all been—dizzy-making, and he'd made me curious, afterward it felt as though he'd tricked me into it, but she was punishing me, so it really was my fault.

Why did I do it? To revenge myself on her for having brought him into the house? Because I'd be closer to her if I went to bed with her lover? Am I crazy? Or sick?

After a week I was wishing she had sent *me* packing. I couldn't concentrate any longer at school, and being at home was even worse. But I didn't know how I could change it. I didn't know what I ought to do.

Until one day, during the meal, someone rang her up. It was so simple, yet it shocked me. It altered something. "Yes," she said into the receiver. "Lisbeth here." I'd heard her say it hundreds of times before. Her name. Her first name. "Lisbeth." I've known my mother's name was Lisbeth since I was a toddler. When I was little I even called her by that name for a while. Lisbeth.

But that evening all at once it was something very important, the way she said her name, so naturally over the telephone, as though to her it was completely a matter of course that she was called Lisbeth.

To me she was my mother, but to herself she was an individual. She was Lisbeth, a woman who had been divorced and had a daughter and who had had a lover. An individual who had lived for thirty-five years, twenty of them without me.

I couldn't sleep again that night, but more because I was excited rather than unhappy. And I understood what I had to do. I had to talk to her—to Lisbeth—even if I had to begin myself, because it was important to me to know what she thought of me and what she felt about that awful sex episode. And if she condemned me, if she condemned me, I had to know that too, for then, perhaps, she'd be able to show me why it was I'd done that with him and then I'd be able to change until I'd become someone she could respect again.

For I can't do without her. Not because she is my mother, but because of who she is.

I spoke her name. After school it was, I'd sat down at her side, I'd made tea just as in the old days, I poured her out a cup and gave it to her and spoke her name. She looked at me.

"I want to talk to you," I said. I was near to tears. "I want to know exactly what it is you are so angry with me about," I said. "Are you so sorry it's finished between you?"

She looked up then, at that question, then she looked at me *and she began to laugh*. And that took me by surprise again, it gave me such a shock that I suddenly began to cry very loudly, and then, and then she put her arms tightly around me and she said all sorts of things, poor child, she said, how could I know you were blaming yourself, no, of course I'm not sorry, she said, that blackguard, such a rotter to take advantage of your curiosity, no, she said, it isn't that, I am sorry, it's true, I'm sorry because something that could have been very special for you and that you could have found out

about all on your own in your own time, that he should have robbed you of that, that's what I'm sorry about, she said, my baby, I didn't say anything because you said nothing, I thought let's forget this unpleasant episode as soon as possible, as soon as possible.

So now everything is just as it was before he came. Just as before. But I don't know whether I'm happy about it.